

UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT
EASTERN DISTRICT OF WISCONSIN

TOMMIE L. CARTER,

Plaintiff,

v.

TORRIA VANBUREN and DEREK
SCHOUTEN,

Defendants.

Case No. 16-CV-1676-JPS

ORDER

Plaintiff filed a *pro se* complaint under 42 U.S.C. § 1983 alleging that his civil rights were violated while he was incarcerated at Waupun Correctional Institution (“Waupun”). (Docket #1). This matter comes before the Court on Plaintiff’s motions to proceed *in forma pauperis*. (Docket #2 and #6). The Court has waived Plaintiff’s initial partial filing fee because of his inability to pay such a fee. (Docket #9).

Under the Prison Litigation Reform Act (“PLRA”), 28 U.S.C. § 1915A, the Court is required to screen complaints brought by prisoners seeking relief against a governmental entity or officer or employee of a governmental entity. *Id.* § 1915A(a). The Court must dismiss a complaint or portion thereof if the prisoner has raised claims that are legally “frivolous or malicious,” that fail to state a claim upon which relief may be granted, or that seek monetary relief from a defendant who is immune from such relief. *Id.* § 1915A(b).

A claim is legally frivolous when it lacks an arguable basis either in law or in fact. *Denton v. Hernandez*, 504 U.S. 25, 31 (1992); *Neitzke v. Williams*, 490 U.S. 319, 325 (1989); *Gladney v. Pendleton Corr. Facility*, 302 F.3d 773, 774 (7th Cir. 2002). The Court may, therefore, dismiss a claim as frivolous where it is based on an indisputably meritless legal theory or where the factual

contentions are clearly baseless. *Neitzke*, 490 U.S. at 327; *Gladney*, 302 F.3d at 774. “Malicious,” although sometimes treated as a synonym for “frivolous,” “is more usefully construed as intended to harass.” *Lindell v. McCallum*, 352 F.3d 1107, 1109 (7th Cir. 2003) (citations omitted); *accord Paul v. Marberry*, 658 F.3d 702, 705 (7th Cir. 2011).

To state a cognizable claim under the federal notice pleading system, the plaintiff is required to provide a “short and plain statement of the claim showing that [he] is entitled to relief[.]” Fed. R. Civ. P. 8(a)(2). It is not necessary for the plaintiff to plead specific facts and his statement need only “give the defendant fair notice of what the . . . claim is and the grounds upon which it rests.” *Bell Atlantic Corp. v. Twombly*, 550 U.S. 544, 555 (2007) (quoting *Conley v. Gibson*, 355 U.S. 41, 47 (1957)); *see Christopher v. Buss*, 384 F.3d 879, 881 (7th Cir. 2004). However, a complaint that offers “labels and conclusions” or “formulaic recitation of the elements of a cause of action will not do.” *Ashcroft v. Iqbal*, 556 U.S. 662, 678 (2009) (quoting *Twombly*, 550 U.S. at 555). To state a claim, a complaint must contain sufficient factual matter, accepted as true, “that is plausible on its face.” *Id.* (quoting *Twombly*, 550 U.S. at 570). “A claim has facial plausibility when the plaintiff pleads factual content that allows the court to draw the reasonable inference that the defendant is liable for the misconduct alleged.” *Id.* (citing *Twombly*, 550 U.S. at 556). The allegations “must be enough to raise a right to relief above the speculative level.” *Twombly*, 550 U.S. at 555 (citation omitted); *Christopher*, 384 F.3d at 881.

In considering whether a complaint states a claim, courts should follow the principles set forth in *Twombly* by first “identifying pleadings that, because they are no more than conclusions, are not entitled to the assumption of truth.” *Iqbal*, 556 U.S. at 679. Legal conclusions must be supported by

factual allegations. *Id.* If there are well-pleaded factual allegations, the Court must “assume their veracity and then determine whether they plausibly give rise to an entitlement to relief.” *Id.*

To state a claim for relief under 42 U.S.C. § 1983, the plaintiff must allege that: (1) he was deprived of a right secured by the Constitution or laws of the United States; and (2) the deprivation was visited upon him by a person or persons acting under color of state law. *Buchanan-Moore v. Cnty. of Milwaukee*, 570 F.3d 824, 827 (7th Cir. 2009) (citing *Kramer v. Village of North Fond du Lac*, 384 F.3d 856, 861 (7th Cir. 2004)); *see also Gomez v. Toledo*, 446 U.S. 635, 640 (1980). The court is obliged to give the plaintiff’s *pro se* allegations, “however inartfully pleaded,” a liberal construction. *See Erickson v. Pardus*, 551 U.S. 89, 94 (2007) (quoting *Estelle v. Gamble*, 429 U.S. 97, 106 (1976)).

Plaintiff alleges that on November 4, 2015, he informed Defendants that he was suicidal and that he “was going to engage in self-harm on the third shift.” (Docket #1 at 1). Defendant Van Buren is a psychologist at Waupun, while Defendant Schouten is a correctional officer. *Id.* Although he does not say what their response was, the Court is left to assume that Defendants ignored Plaintiff’s statement. *See id.* That night, Plaintiff attempted suicide by cutting his arms and legs, and by overdosing on acetaminophen pills. *Id.* at 2. Correctional officers found him in his cell, unconscious and bleeding. *Id.* He was taken to the hospital and treated. *Id.* Plaintiff asserts that Defendants violated the Eighth Amendment when they failed to prevent him from attempting suicide. *Id.* at 3. He further claims that their failure to respond to his suicide threats is one instance among a pattern of such conduct by officials at the prison. *Id.* Plaintiff seeks monetary and injunctive relief. *Id.* at 3–4.

Plaintiff may proceed on an Eighth Amendment claim for Defendants' deliberate indifference to his serious medical needs—in particular, their allegedly inadequate response to his repeated suicidal statements. To state a claim of deliberate indifference to a serious medical need, the plaintiff must show: (1) an objectively serious medical condition; (2) that the defendants knew of the condition and were deliberately indifferent in treating it; and (3) this indifference caused the plaintiff some injury. *Gayton v. McCoy*, 593 F.3d 610, 620 (7th Cir. 2010). The deliberate indifference inquiry here, like that applicable to conditions of confinement, has two components. "The official must have subjective knowledge of the risk to the inmate's health, and the official also must disregard that risk." *Id.* Even if an official is aware of the risk to the inmate's health, "he is free from liability if he 'responded reasonably to the risk, even if the harm ultimately was not averted.'" *Id.* (quoting *Farmer*, 511 U.S. at 843). Negligence cannot support a claim of deliberate indifference, nor is medical malpractice a constitutional violation. *Estelle v. Gamble*, 429 U.S. 97, 105–06 (1976); *Roe v. Elyea*, 631 F.3d 843, 857 (7th Cir. 2011). Construing Plaintiff's allegations liberally, the Court finds that Plaintiff should be permitted to proceed on this claim. See *Estate of Novack ex rel. Turbin v. Cnty. of Wood*, 226 F.3d 525, 529 (7th Cir. 2000) ("In order to be liable under the Eighth Amendment, a prison official must be cognizant of the significant likelihood that an inmate may imminently seek to take his own life and must fail to take reasonable steps to prevent the inmate from performing this act."). It may be that Defendants responded adequately to Plaintiff's threat of suicide, but, given the low bar applied at the screening stage, the Court finds it appropriate to let this claim proceed.

For the reasons stated above, the Court finds that Plaintiff may proceed on the following claim: an Eighth Amendment claim of deliberate

indifference to his serious medical need arising from Plaintiff's threat of suicide and suicide attempt on November 4, 2015.

Accordingly,

IT IS ORDERED that Plaintiff's motions for leave to proceed *in forma pauperis* (Docket #2 and #6) be and the same is hereby **GRANTED**;

IT IS FURTHER ORDERED that pursuant to an informal service agreement between the Wisconsin Department of Justice and this Court, copies of Plaintiff's complaint and this order will be electronically sent to the Wisconsin Department of Justice for service on Defendants;

IT IS FURTHER ORDERED that, pursuant to the informal service agreement between the Wisconsin Department of Justice and this Court, Defendants shall file a responsive pleading to the complaint within sixty (60) days of receiving electronic notice of this order;

IT IS FURTHER ORDERED that the Secretary of the Wisconsin Department of Corrections or his designee shall collect from Plaintiff's prison trust account the balance of the filing fee by collecting monthly payments from Plaintiff's prison trust account in an amount equal to 20% of the preceding month's income credited to the prisoner's trust account and forwarding payments to the Clerk of Court each time the amount in the account exceeds \$10 in accordance with 28 U.S.C. § 1915(b)(2). The payments shall be clearly identified by the case name and number assigned to this action;

IT IS FURTHER ORDERED that a copy of this order be sent to the warden of the institution where the inmate is confined; and

IT IS FURTHER ORDERED that, pursuant to the Prisoner E-Filing Program, Plaintiff shall submit all correspondence and case filings to institution staff, who will scan and e-mail documents to the Court. The

Prisoner E-Filing Program is in effect at Dodge Correctional Institution, Green Bay Correctional Institution, Waupun Correctional Institution, and Wisconsin Secure Program Facility and, therefore, if Plaintiff is no longer incarcerated any of these institutions, he will be required to submit all correspondence and legal material to:

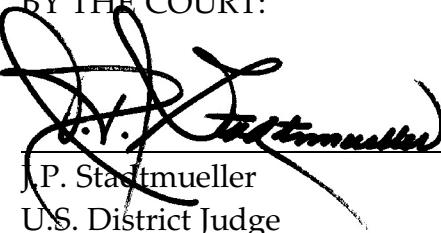
Office of the Clerk
United States District Court
Eastern District of Wisconsin
362 United States Courthouse
517 E. Wisconsin Avenue
Milwaukee, Wisconsin 53202

Plaintiff is further advised that failure to make a timely submission may result in the dismissal of this action for failure to prosecute.

In addition, the parties must notify the Clerk of Court of any change of address. Failure to do so could result in orders or other information not being timely delivered, thus affecting the legal rights of the parties.

Dated at Milwaukee, Wisconsin, this 1st day of February, 2017.

BY THE COURT:


J.P. Stadtmauer
U.S. District Judge